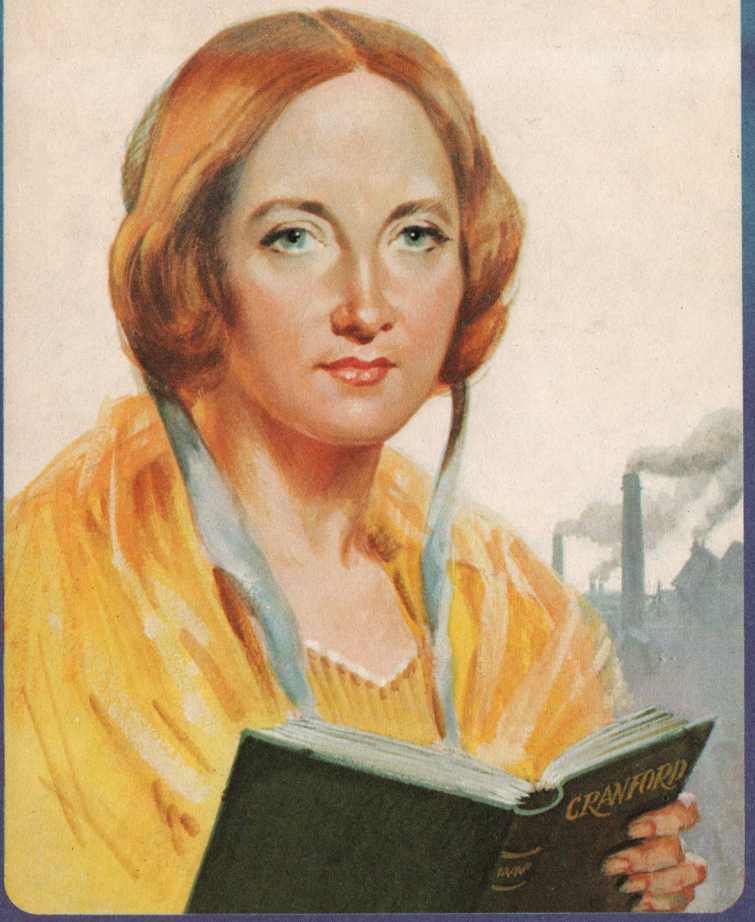
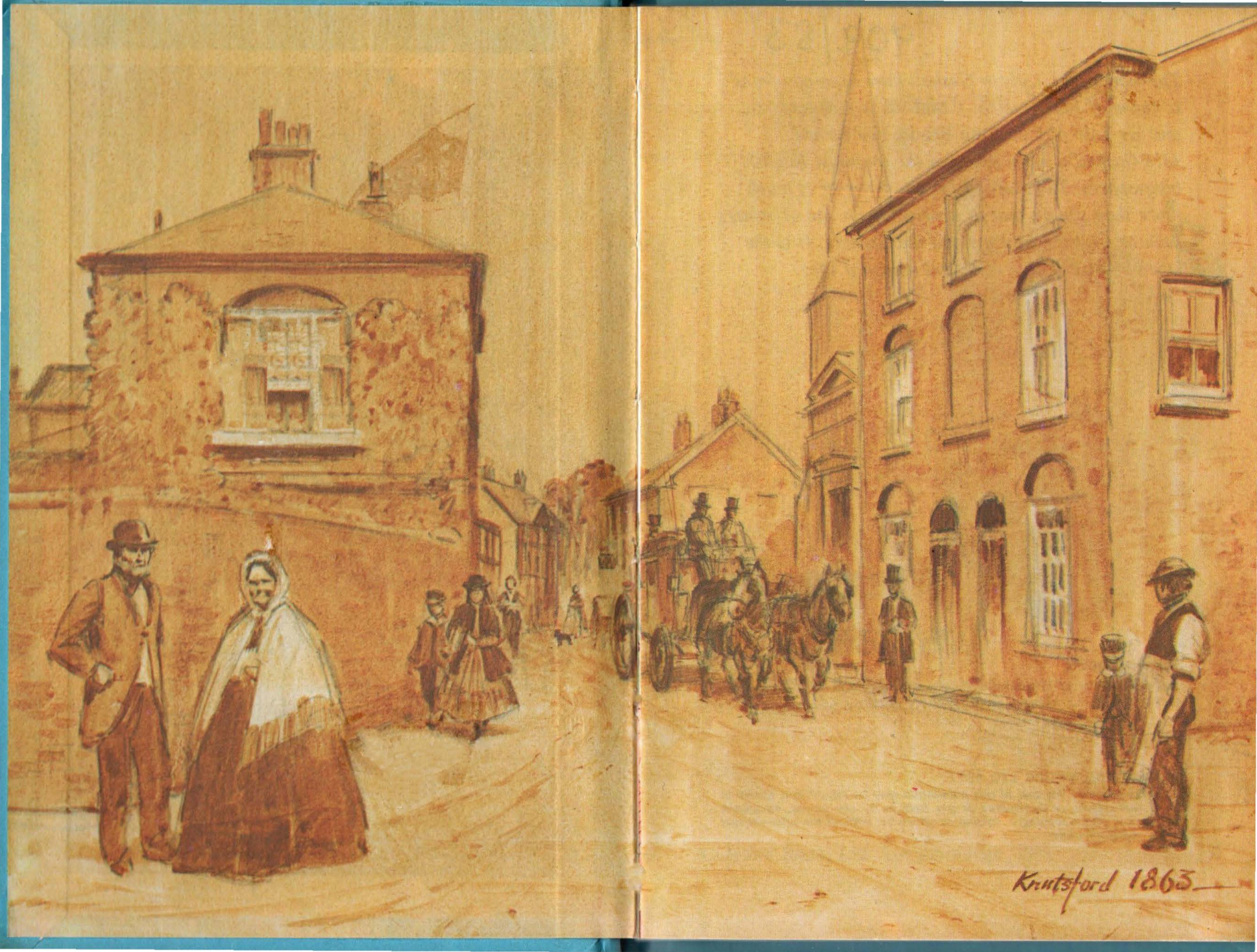
Elizabeth Gaskell




Knutsford 1863

The works of Elizabeth Gaskell have been compared to those of Jane Austen: Cranford *is now a classic, and her* Life of Charlotte Brontë *has earned Mrs Gaskell a place amongst the foremost English biographers. The story of her life however is much more than simply that of a writer in an age of writers such as Charles Dickens and the Brontës. It is the story of an era, a people, and a way of life.*

Acknowledgment

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Elizabeth Gaskell

by BARBARA BRILL
with illustrations by ROGER HALL

Ladybird Books Ltd Loughborough 1977

ELIZABETH GASKELL

On a November day in the year 1811, a stage coach set out from London travelling northwards. Among the passengers was a lady with a baby girl just over a year old. The little girl was too young to know that she was going on a long journey, leaving the house where she was born in Cheyne Row, near Battersea Bridge in London, to a new home with an aunt in Cheshire.

The baby girl, Elizabeth Cleghorn Stevenson, grew up to become Mrs Gaskell, the famous nineteenth century novelist. From her writings we are able to learn a great deal about life in England in those days.

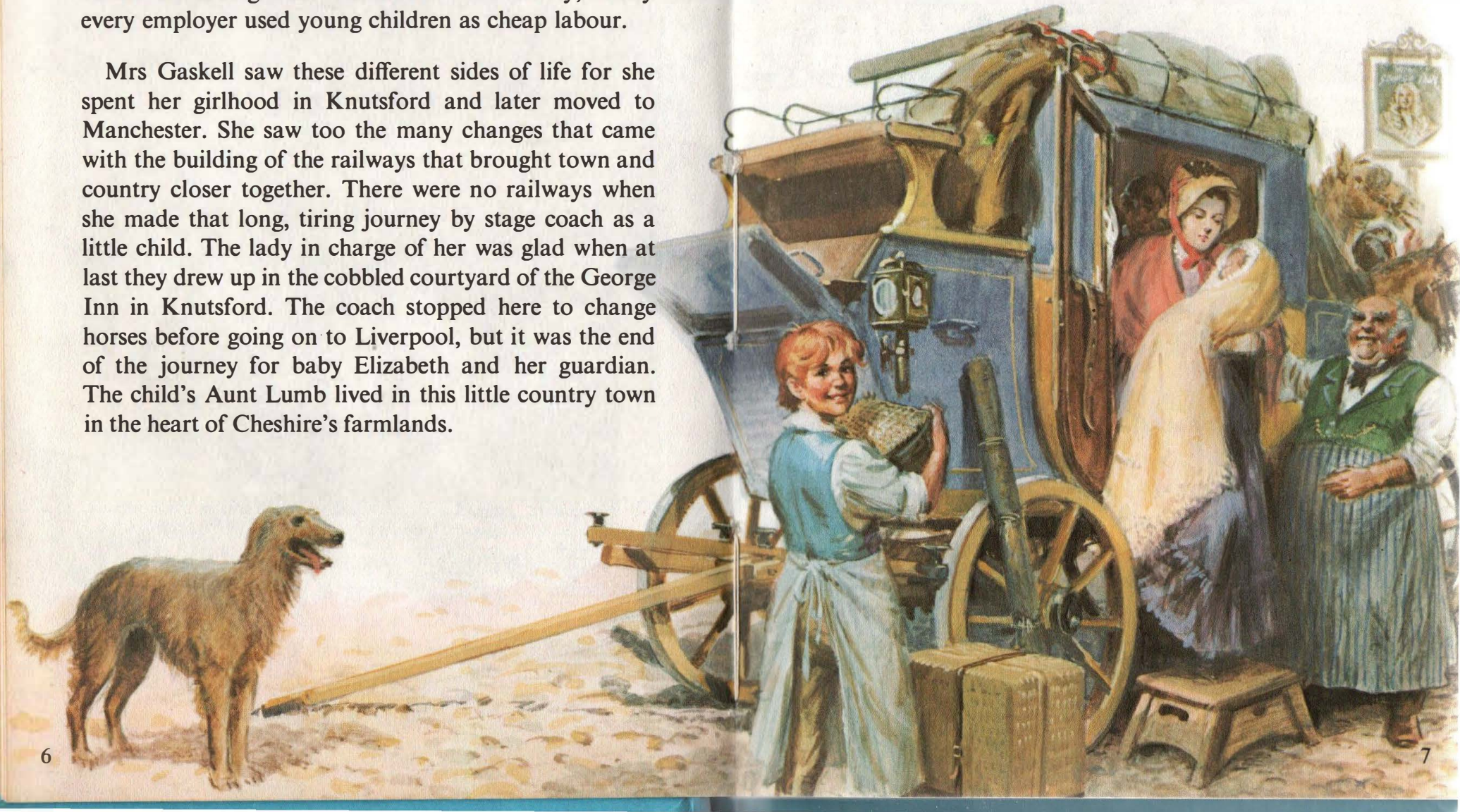
Mrs Gaskell was born at a time when life went at a slow pace. Horse and cart, carriage and stage coach were the only means of transport, though goods were being sent by canal. Roads were bad and few people travelled far unless out of necessity. The people living in a country town, like Knutsford, where Mrs Gaskell's aunt lived, went their own peaceful ways and the happenings of the big city of Manchester, less than four hours' drive away by stage coach, were no concern of theirs.

In town and country the wealthy families lived like kings and queens in large town houses and country estates, each with a staff of servants. People of moderate means led a carefree existence and could afford servants to help care for their large families. It was hard work running a house in those days, for coal and hot water had to be carried upstairs and downstairs, and rooms were lit by lamps and candles.

For the labouring man, battling to feed and clothe his family on low wages, life was very hard. Men and women from the country began to crowd into the towns, hoping for higher pay in the large factories and mills that were springing up to house the newly-invented power-driven machinery. At first there were not enough dwellings in the towns to house these families. Many were forced to live in underground cellars. To save money, nearly every employer used young children as cheap labour.

Mrs Gaskell saw these different sides of life for she spent her girlhood in Knutsford and later moved to Manchester. She saw too the many changes that came with the building of the railways that brought town and country closer together. There were no railways when she made that long, tiring journey by stage coach as a little child. The lady in charge of her was glad when at last they drew up in the cobbled courtyard of the George Inn in Knutsford. The coach stopped here to change horses before going on to Liverpool, but it was the end of the journey for baby Elizabeth and her guardian. The child's Aunt Lumb lived in this little country town in the heart of Cheshire's farmlands.

Elizabeth's mother had died two months ago and her father was heart-broken. He felt his baby daughter needed a woman's care and was thankful when his wife's sister, Mrs Hannah Lumb, offered to take the child into her home. He arranged for a friend to take Elizabeth to Knutsford by stage coach.



'*Heathside*', *Knutsford*

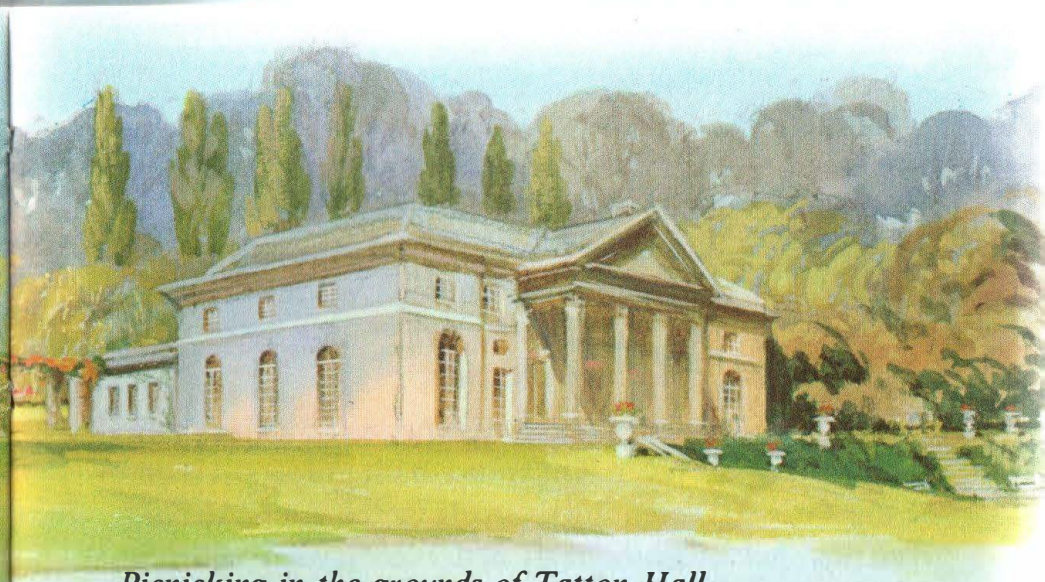
Aunt Lumb lived in a roomy red-brick house with a large garden overlooking Knutsford Heath, on the edge of the town. She had had sorrow in her life, for her husband was confined to an asylum and their only daughter, Mary Ann, was crippled and died young. Her little niece brought great happiness into 'Heathside' and from the beginning Aunt Lumb treated her as her own child.

Aunt Lumb had been brought up on a farm, not far from Knutsford, and managed her house and garden as a farmer's wife would. She lived simply and economically, doing her own washing and baking, and keeping hens, ducks and geese, a pig and a cow in the garden. Elizabeth followed her aunt around as she did her daily tasks and as she grew older was given her own little duties.

Elizabeth often went to see her Uncle Peter Holland, a well-loved doctor, who lived in the centre of the town near the church. Aunt Lumb and Uncle Peter had many friends and acquaintances, for everyone knew everyone in Knutsford. Elizabeth was often taken visiting, and grew up to know every house and shop in the narrow, winding streets of the town. She became accustomed to the tea parties that Aunt Lumb gave and attended.

Uncle Peter used to take Elizabeth with him on his rounds in his dog-cart, calling on his patients. He visited humble farm-workers, wealthy farmers, and the lords and ladies of the great mansions set in surrounding parkland.

Sometimes picnics and garden parties were held in the grounds of the large country houses outside Knutsford. Elizabeth joined her cousins and friends on these outings, travelling by pony or donkey or by cart. She was able to peer down the long avenues of trees at the great houses with their beautifully-kept lawns and gardens. The young people would often spread out their picnic by the side of a lake. In Cheshire there are many inland stretches of water, known as meres, and many large family estates have their own meres within their parks.



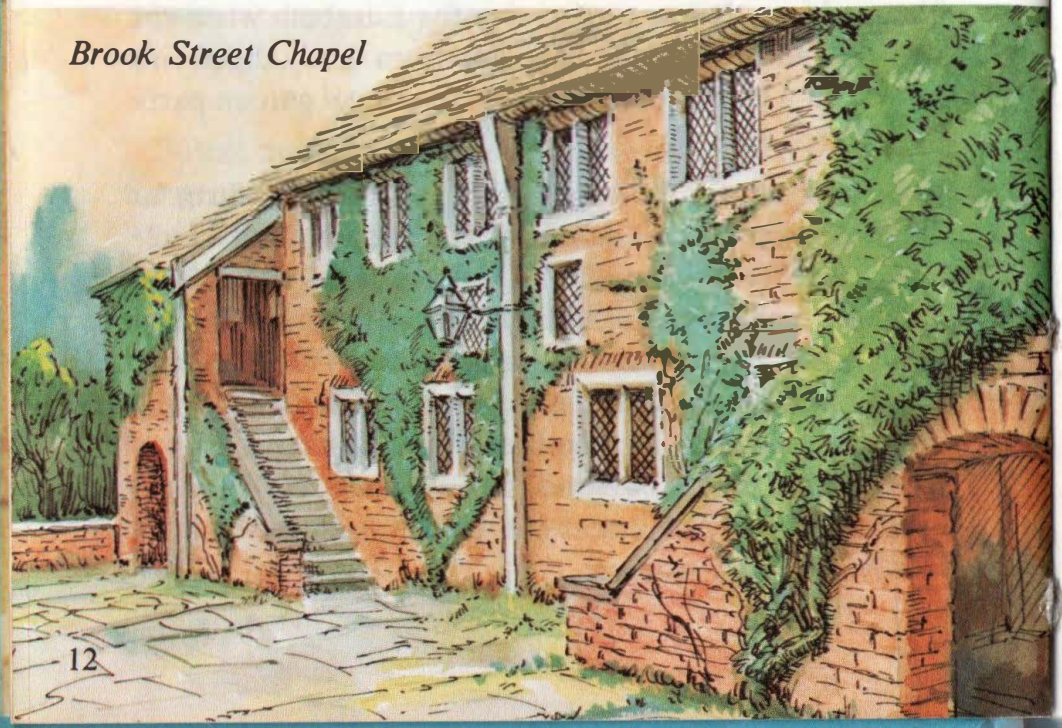
Picnicking in the grounds of Tatton Hall

At the end of Knutsford's main street are the entrance gates of Tatton Hall, then the home of the Egertons. Inside the gates a long drive leads up to the Hall past Tatton Mere. It was a great day for Elizabeth when she was invited to join the scholars from Lady Egerton's little school by the park gates at the annual garden party in the grounds.

Best of all the little girl liked visiting the farm at Sandlebridge, the old home of Aunt Lumb and Uncle Peter and her own mother. This was three miles from Knutsford and was farmed by her grandfather, Samuel Holland. The farm stood on a hill above the water mill and the old smithy, with fields on every side. Her grandfather died when Elizabeth was six, but she always remembered this kind and saintly man. He used to conduct family prayers at the end of each day for his family and farm workers.

All the Holland family had been brought up as Unitarians. Elizabeth's father was also a member, and for a while a preacher, in this branch of the Nonconformist Church. The Unitarians are devout Christians but disagree with the Established Church over the existence of the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and practise a simpler form of worship.

Aunt Lumb took Elizabeth with her on Sundays to the Brook Street Chapel in Knutsford, built in 1689. It is one of the earliest Dissenting Chapels in the country, built after the Act of Parliament had been passed allowing other forms of Christian worship than that used by the Church of England. The chapel still stands today, a homely red-brick building half-covered in ivy. It has outside stone steps at each end leading to an upstairs gallery. When Elizabeth was old enough, she became a Sunday School teacher.



Brook Street Chapel

She had lessons in reading and writing from Aunt Lumb, and from an early age she loved books. Her aunt also taught her sewing, and trained her in all sides of household management. Her cousins, who lived at Church House with Uncle Peter, were older than Elizabeth and gave her lessons in other subjects, so she did not go to school until she was thirteen.

A French dancing master who taught dancing at the wealthy Knutsford houses came regularly to 'Heathside' to give Elizabeth lessons in French. She was very fond of Monsieur Rogier and looked forward to his visits. She would set out across the heath to meet him. She became a good French scholar and a fluent speaker.

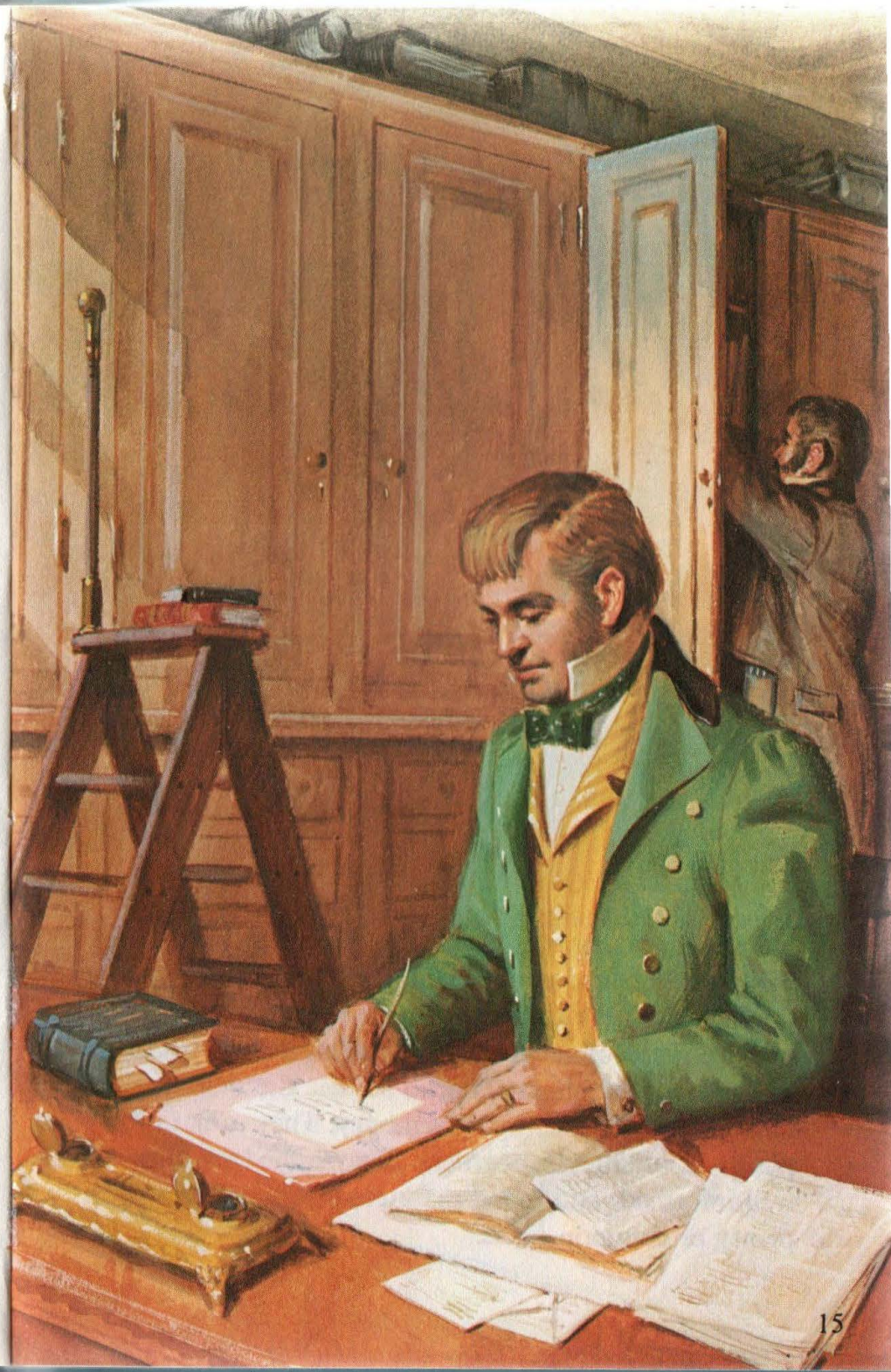
Elizabeth's father sometimes came up to Cheshire to see her. Mr Stevenson had married again and had a boy and a girl by his second wife. They moved away from the house where Elizabeth was born to another part of Chelsea.

Her brother John occasionally came to Knutsford to stay. He was a high-spirited boy, full of mischief, and his sister looked forward to his visits and having a boy in the house. He joined the Merchant Navy and became a lieutenant.

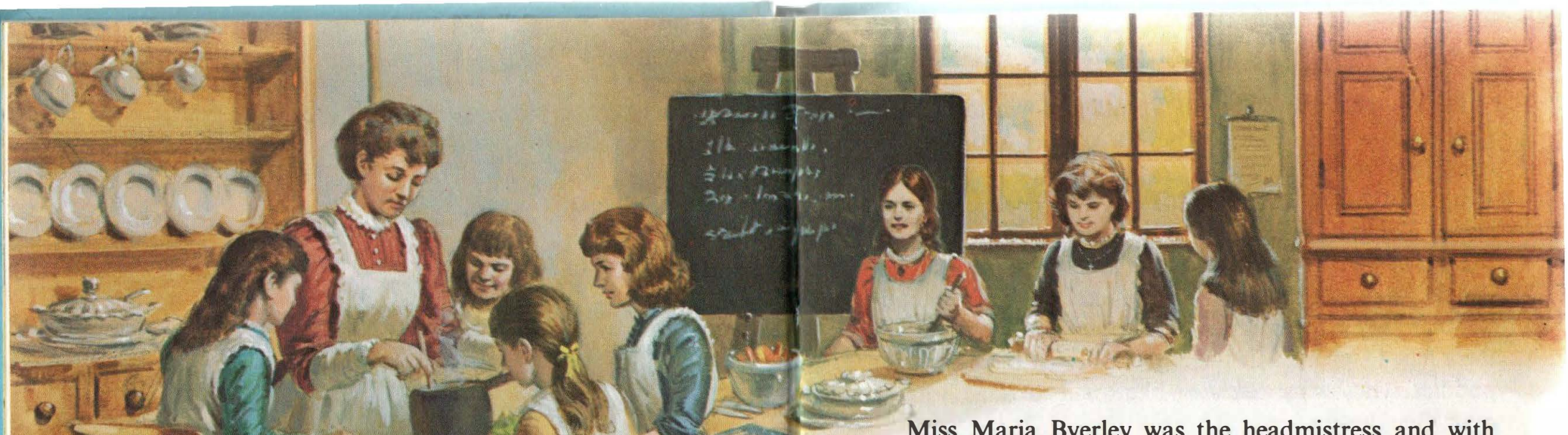
When Elizabeth went to Chelsea to stay she never felt that her father's house was her home but she loved to be with him. He was a scholarly man with many interests. He would talk to her about his boyhood in Scotland and of his early days as a private tutor in Belgium.

Best of all Elizabeth liked to hear about his meeting with her mother at Sandlebridge when he became a preacher in Manchester. His life had been one of ups and downs, for after his first marriage he gave up preaching and went in for farming without success, so then began to take in pupils. He eventually came to London to take up a position as Keeper of the Treasury Records. After this he had time for a little writing, and contributed articles and essays to newspapers on many subjects.

He took a keen interest in Elizabeth's education and when she was thirteen, he and Aunt Lumb agreed that she should go away to boarding school.



William Stevenson writing



The school that was chosen for Elizabeth was 'Avonbank' at Stratford-upon-Avon, run by the three Misses Byerley who were known to Mr Stevenson's second wife and to the Holland family. They were well-educated ladies of strong character who started the school when their father died leaving little money. They took in forty pupils including six boarders. They aimed to turn out well-informed and good-mannered young ladies with plenty of common sense.

Miss Maria Byerley was the headmistress and with her sisters supervised the girls' lessons in English, Arithmetic, History, Geography, French, Italian, Music, Drawing, Dancing, Deportment and Correct Etiquette. The school housekeeper saw to it that the pupils could do fine sewing and darning as well as embroidery, and taught them cookery and the selection of suitable dishes for the right seasons.

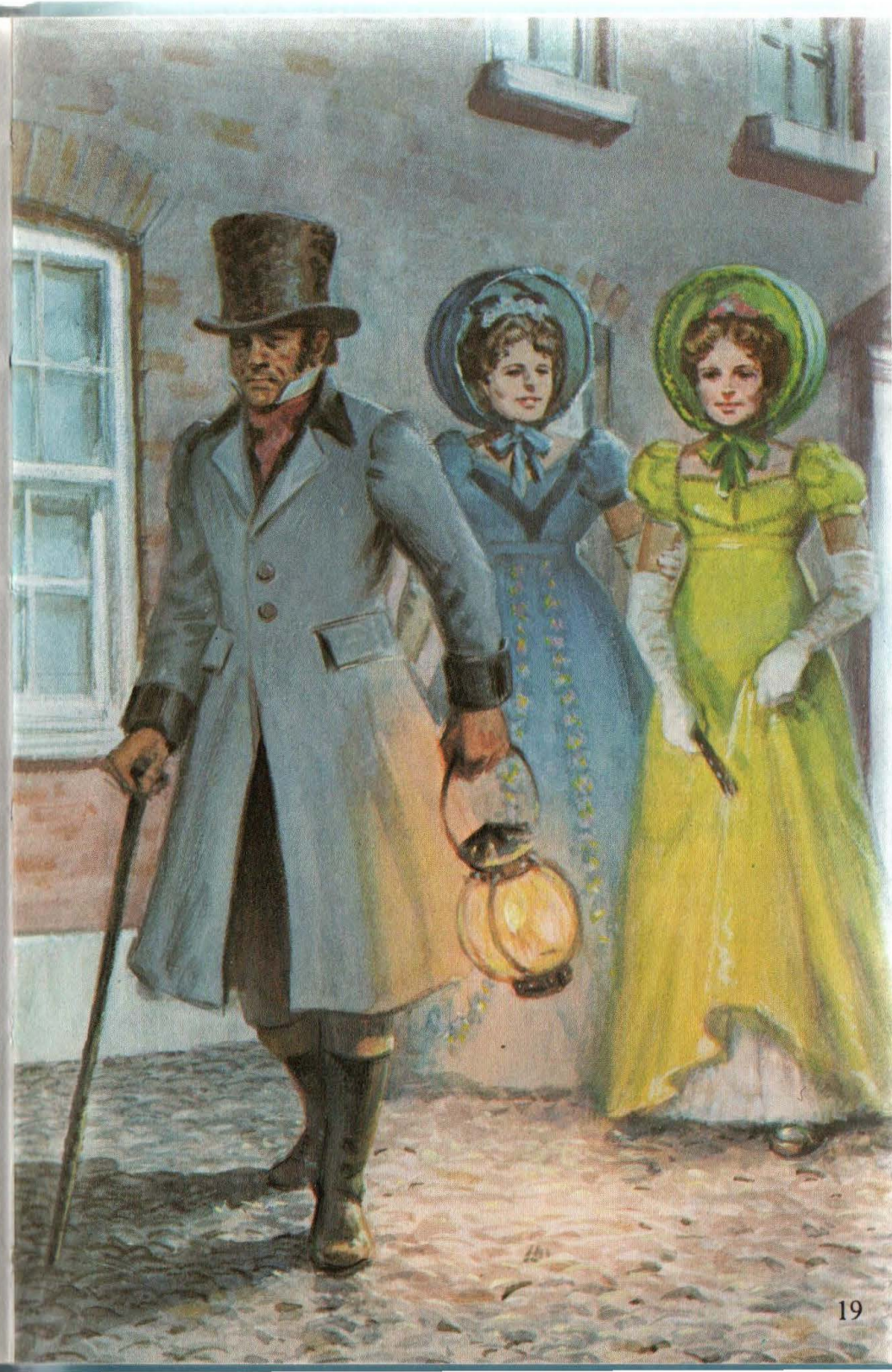
Elizabeth enjoyed her schooldays. 'Avonbank' was a beautiful fifteenth century house, and there was a homely atmosphere in the school. Miss Maria was much loved and respected by her pupils. She took an interest in Elizabeth, and encouraged her to write compositions and to sing and play the piano.

Because of the expense of the journey home by stage coach, Elizabeth stayed on at school during the Christmas holidays, but was invited out to parties by families in Stratford. She stayed at 'Avonbank' for three years, and then returned to 'Heathside', a young lady of seventeen.

Back in Knutsford, Elizabeth settled down to the old quiet life at 'Heathside'. The tea parties and visiting continued, and she was now old enough to join the Knutsford ladies at card parties and concerts and the occasional ball. When they attended an evening outing, the ladies were accompanied by a lantern-bearer as they picked their way along the cobbled streets. In bad weather they wore wooden clogs, known as *pattens*, on their feet to protect their dainty shoes from pools and puddles. They wore *calashes*, like small carriage hoods, over their heads.

Elizabeth could now see the funny side to the attempts that many of the Knutsford ladies made to keep up with their neighbours. She respected those with a sense of pride in their houses; but she had little time for those who thought more of people with titles to their names than they did of men and women, however humble, of honest character. She and Aunt Lumb never forgot the less fortunate people of the town. They visited the sick and bereaved and took gifts of food and clothing to the needy.

This quiet routine was disturbed when sad news came from Chelsea. Mr Stevenson had heard that his son, John, was reported missing after going ashore from his ship at Calcutta. All attempts to trace him failed, and the mystery of his disappearance was never solved. This tragedy affected Mr Stevenson's health, and he sent for Elizabeth to come to Chelsea. At first he seemed better, and Elizabeth spent many happy hours with him. He taught her Latin, and helped her to improve her French and Italian.

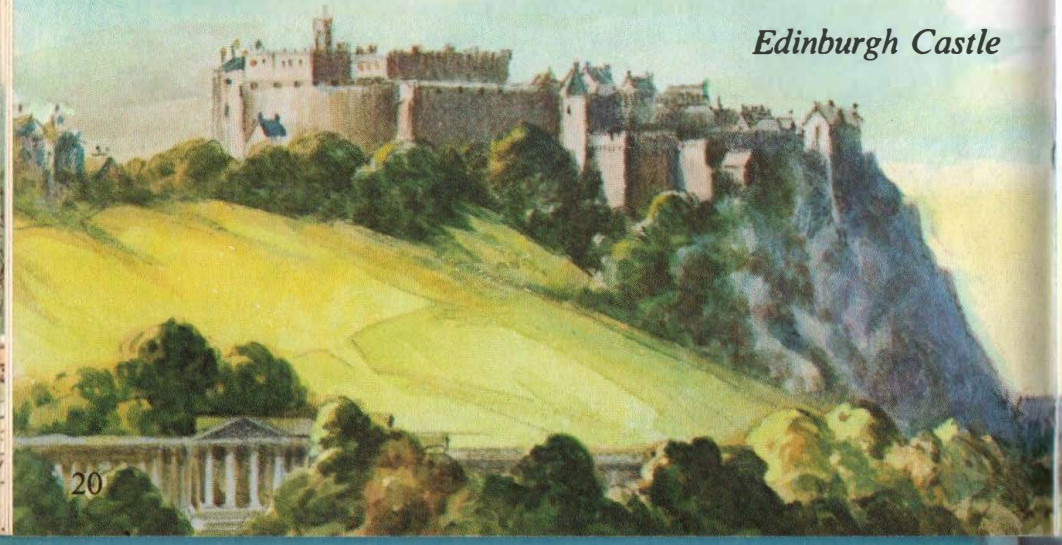


Mr Stevenson never fully recovered his health. Elizabeth stayed with him for two years and helped nurse him until his death. Her stepmother sold the home, and Elizabeth went to stay with some of her Holland relations in another part of London. Her cousin, Sir Henry Holland, was a successful physician, and Elizabeth saw something of the fashionable world of the capital.

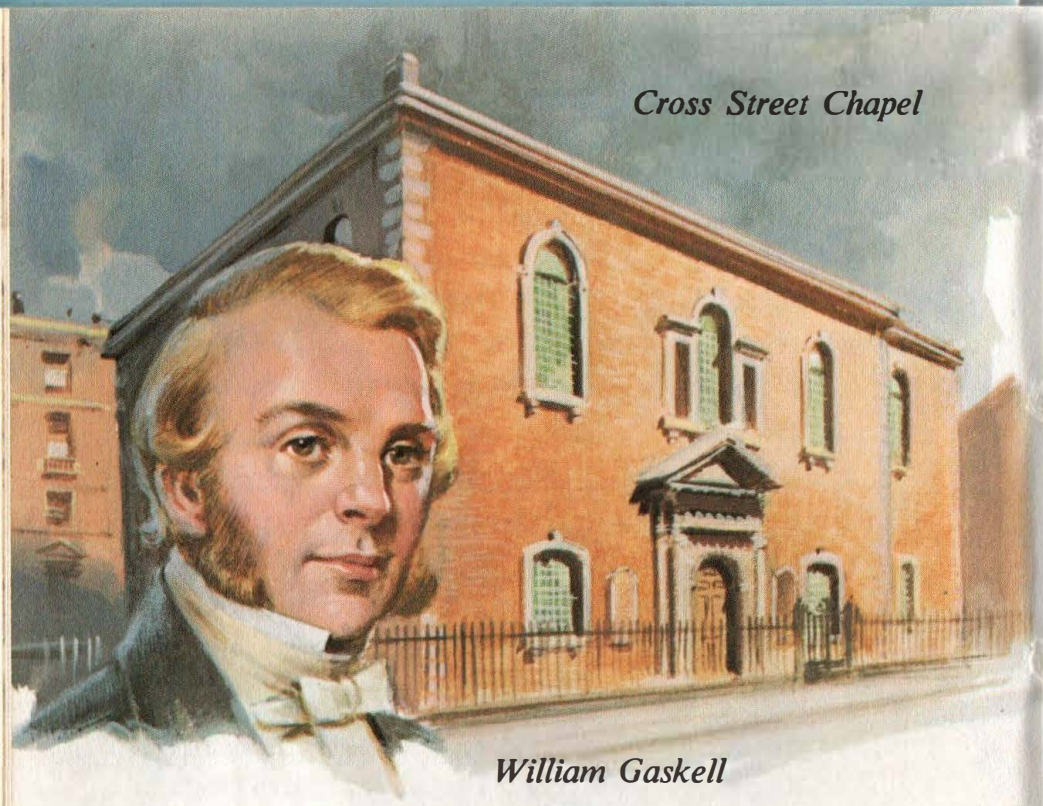
Her father left very little money, so Elizabeth, determined to be independent of relatives, decided to prepare herself to become a governess. Her cousin Henry arranged for her to go to Newcastle to live for a while with the Reverend William Turner, who had once been his tutor.

Elizabeth stayed in Mr Turner's home for two years and was extremely happy with this kind minister and his daughter, Ann. William Turner was a gifted teacher and a fine preacher, and he set Elizabeth an example of unselfishness that she tried to follow for the rest of her life. She helped him with his work in many activities among the people of Newcastle.

Edinburgh Castle



When Elizabeth was twenty, there was a severe outbreak of fever in the north of England that spread to Newcastle. Mr Turner sent the two girls to Edinburgh to escape infection as this was a deadly illness. Elizabeth was glad of a chance to see Scotland, where her father and mother had once lived. The two girls lived in lodgings, and soon found themselves with a wide circle of friends. Elizabeth had grown into a beautiful young woman and was much admired. An artist painted a miniature of her, and a sculptor made a marble bust.



Cross Street Chapel

William Gaskell

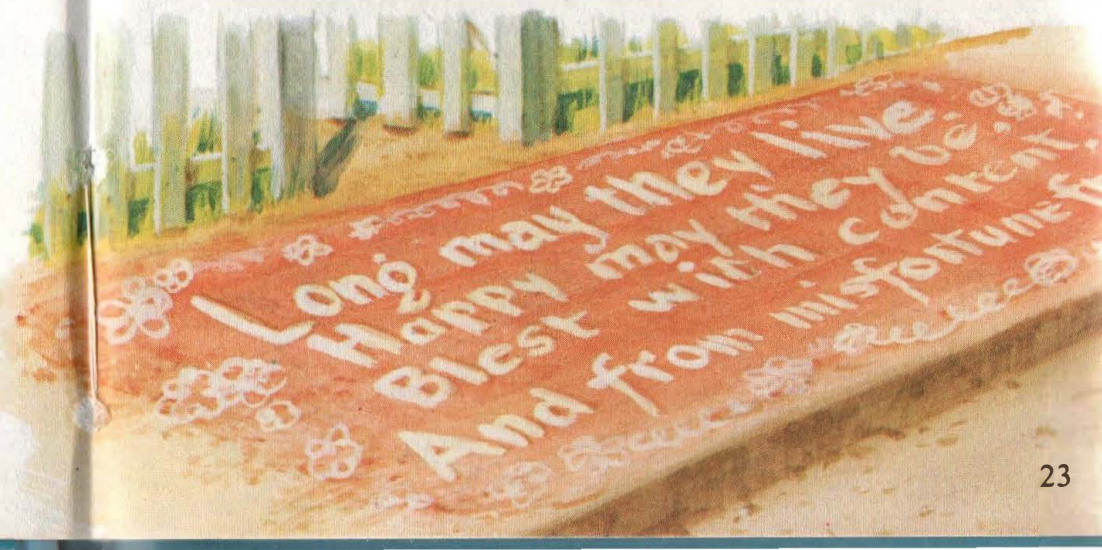
Elizabeth's next journey was to Manchester. She and Ann were invited to stay with Mr Turner's other daughter, the wife of the minister of Manchester's Unitarian Chapel in Cross Street. Elizabeth was pleased to receive this invitation, for she would be near enough to Knutsford to visit Aunt Lumb.

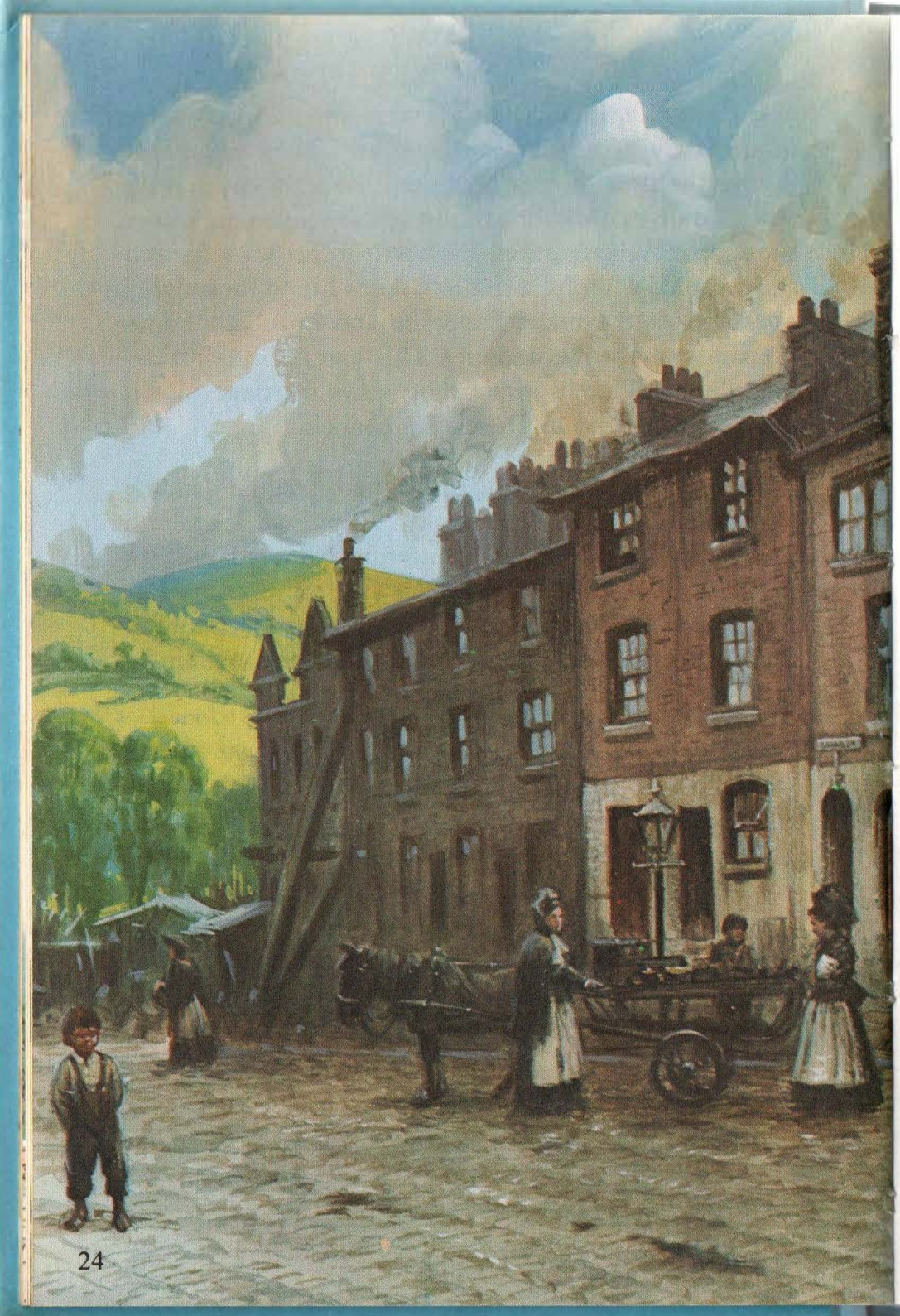
At the minister's house Elizabeth met his assistant, tall and handsome William Gaskell. He was a Lancashire man who, since finishing his training for the ministry, had been at Cross Street Chapel for three years. He was twenty seven and was already making a name for himself as an outstanding preacher with a beautiful speaking voice. He had a great love of English literature, and his sermons were always well written.

He and Elizabeth shared many interests and were immediately attracted to each other. They met often during the next few months, as Elizabeth stayed with Aunt Lumb and did not return to Newcastle. In a very short time William asked Elizabeth to be his wife, and she accepted without hesitation. Aunt Lumb thoroughly approved of the match, and she and Elizabeth began preparations for the wedding. This had to be at Knutsford Parish Church, for in those days marriages could not be solemnized in Dissenting chapels.

There was great rejoicing in Knutsford on the wedding day, August 30th 1832. An old custom had long been practised in the town, of scattering coloured sand in patterns on the street pavements on festive occasions. Nearly every house in Knutsford had sanded its pathway for Elizabeth's wedding. These words were written in sand on some of the pavements:

Long may they live,
Happy may they be,
Blest with content,
And from misfortune free.





William and Elizabeth were certainly blessed with happiness and contentment. This lasted throughout their years together in Manchester that remained their home for the rest of their lives. With William as partner, Elizabeth was able to face life in this dark, smoky town that was in such contrast to rural Knutsford.

The Gaskells spent their honeymoon in the mountains of North Wales, and then came home to the little house that William had rented not far from the centre of Manchester. At that time Manchester was not such a sprawling city as it is today, and the Gaskells' house was within walking distance of green fields; but you could not get away from soot and grime. It was difficult to find flowers that would grow in their little garden. Elizabeth suffered from headaches because of the dust-laden atmosphere, but she did not complain. She applied herself to the task of making a happy home.

William's salary as a junior minister was quite small, so Elizabeth had to keep house carefully as Aunt Lumb had taught her. She always dressed simply, choosing neat well-made clothes in sober colours, with no trimming and wearing no jewellery. Her house, too, was neat and trim and all callers received a warm welcome from Mr and Mrs Gaskell.

The people of Cross Street Chapel took readily to their young minister's wife. Many of the congregation were well-to-do families who drove up to chapel in their carriages. Among them were some of Manchester's leading citizens, men and women of wide interests, who enjoyed visiting the Gaskells.

Through the chapel the Gaskells also met the working men and women of Manchester. They saw the great differences between the lives of the men who owned the mills and factories and the men who worked in them.

Together they did all they could to make life easier for the poor. They both taught at a large Sunday school in Manchester. The children who worked all day in the mills had no schooling. They were taught to read and write by their Sunday school teachers. Elizabeth saw for the first time the dreadful hovels and cellars in which many workers lived. She admired the courage with which they endured hardship.

Many workers lived in great poverty

Elizabeth and William had their own experience of sorrow when their first baby was stillborn a year after their marriage. This loss added to Elizabeth's sympathy and understanding of the suffering of working class mothers whose children often died of starvation and disease. She visited them to give them comfort.

Within the next eight years the Gaskells were blessed with three little daughters, Marianne, Margaret and Florence. Elizabeth began to keep a diary when Marianne was born, recording in it the stages in her little daughter's progress. She did not make an entry every day but noted down instances of the little girl's behaviour and health, and also her own ways of tackling the duties of motherhood. At the end of each entry Elizabeth wrote a little prayer for guidance: 'Oh God,' she wrote, 'make me more even-tempered'; and, 'Help me to regulate my impatient temper better.'

In 1842 the Gaskells moved to a larger house a little further away from the centre of Manchester. It was not an easy house to run, and Elizabeth called it 'a house full of cold draughts'. She was fortunate in finding a faithful maid, Hearn, who remained with the family for fifty years.

With three little daughters to see to, Elizabeth was busier than ever. Occasionally she took the children to stay at Knutsford and Sandlebridge, and sometimes to the seaside, but William rarely took a holiday. His duties at the chapel and lectures he was giving to working men occupied all his time, but he was happy in his work. His wife said he loved Manchester and his study better than any other place.

They had one enjoyable holiday together, without the children, on the Continent. It was Elizabeth's first visit abroad, and she wrote home describing the gay time they were having and the scenery they saw as they journeyed down the Rhine.

She made a habit of writing long newsy letters to her friends and relatives, cramming her pages with details of everyday incidents and bringing everything vividly alive. Her letters were always full of fun and showed her happy nature. She wrote many serious letters, too, in connection with her work for the poor, and also letters of introduction to help friends travelling away from home.

When she was twenty eight she wrote an article about an old country house she had once visited near Stratford-upon-Avon. This was later printed in a magazine published by Mr and Mrs Howitt, who became her friends and advisers when she started to write a novel.

It was William who suggested that Elizabeth should start writing a book. He thought it would help to take her mind off a great sorrow that had come to them. This was the loss of a baby son, William, born to them in 1844, who died suddenly of scarlet fever when he was ten months old.

Elizabeth was heartbroken and for many months her health suffered. As she became absorbed in writing her book, she began to improve. It took her three years to complete it, for she did not shut herself away to work at the book, but wrote at one end of the dining-room table. She took up her pen whenever she could find some spare time during her busy days. She always put her duties to her family and friends, and those in need, before anything else.

There was soon another baby in the house to fill the gap left by little William's death. A fourth daughter, Julia, was born in 1846 when Marianne was twelve, Margaret nine and Florence four. Elizabeth's hands were very full, but she did not put aside her novel.

She chose to write about working class life in Manchester and called the book *Mary Barton.* The heroine was the daughter of a weaver who brought trouble on himself by stirring up the workers against their masters. It was a sad story, for Mrs Gaskell gave a truthful picture of living conditions of the working people, and of their hardships when trade was bad. William helped with the Lancashire dialect, of which he had made a special study.

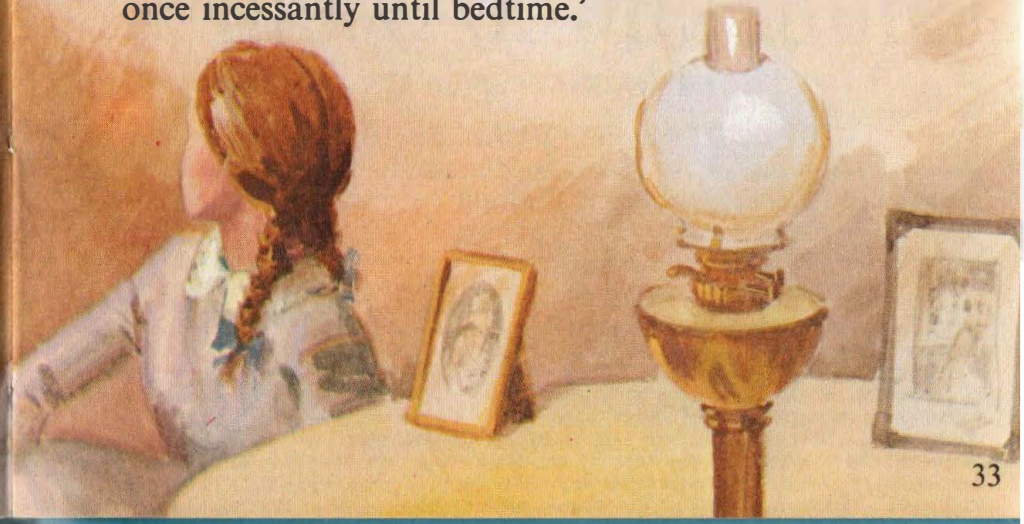
Writing her first book -
on the end of the dining-table

When Elizabeth finished her book Mr and Mrs Howitt helped her to find a publisher, and he was immediately impressed by it. It was agreed that Mrs Gaskell's name should not appear as the authoress, and she chose instead the pen-name of Cotton Mather Mills, Esq. No doubt she thought that Manchester people would disapprove of the wife of a well-known parson writing so outspokenly about the seamy side of life in their town.

The book caused a stir, and woke people up to the fact that something must be done to improve living conditions in the overcrowded industrial towns. Some of Manchester's leading industrialists criticised *Mary Barton* because they thought it was unfair to employers, many of whom treated their work-people well.

Some of Mrs Gaskell's close friends guessed that she was the author, and the secret gradually leaked out. Leading literary figures agreed that the book was the work of a new and talented writer and were eager to meet her. She was invited to London to attend literary breakfasts and dinners that were popular at that time among editors and authors.

William was pleased for Elizabeth to go as he was always the most understanding husband and was delighted by his wife's success. Whenever she was away she wrote long and affectionate letters home to her children. She admitted to feeling homesick away from the family. In a letter to a friend she described her return home after an absence: 'The four girls rushed upon me and almost smothered me and we all six talked all at once incessantly until bedtime.'



Among the writers Mrs Gaskell met was Charles Dickens, already a popular novelist. When she was invited to his house she was interested to see his study lined from floor to ceiling with books. In the centre was a standing desk where he did all his writing. He had just finished writing *David Copperfield*, which became one of his best-known works. He had started to publish a weekly magazine *Household Words* and wanted Elizabeth to write some stories for it.

This was the beginning for Mrs Gaskell of a long period as contributor to *Household Words*. He liked the first stories she sent, particularly a series of stories she started on about life in an imaginary country village called 'Cranford'. He asked for more, and for two years she sent him a steady supply of stories about this village.

The front cover of Household Words

"*Familiar in their Mouths as* HOUSEHOLD WORDS."—SHAKESPEARE

HOUSEHOLD WORDS.

A WEEKLY JOURNAL.

CONDUCTED BY CHARLES DICKENS.

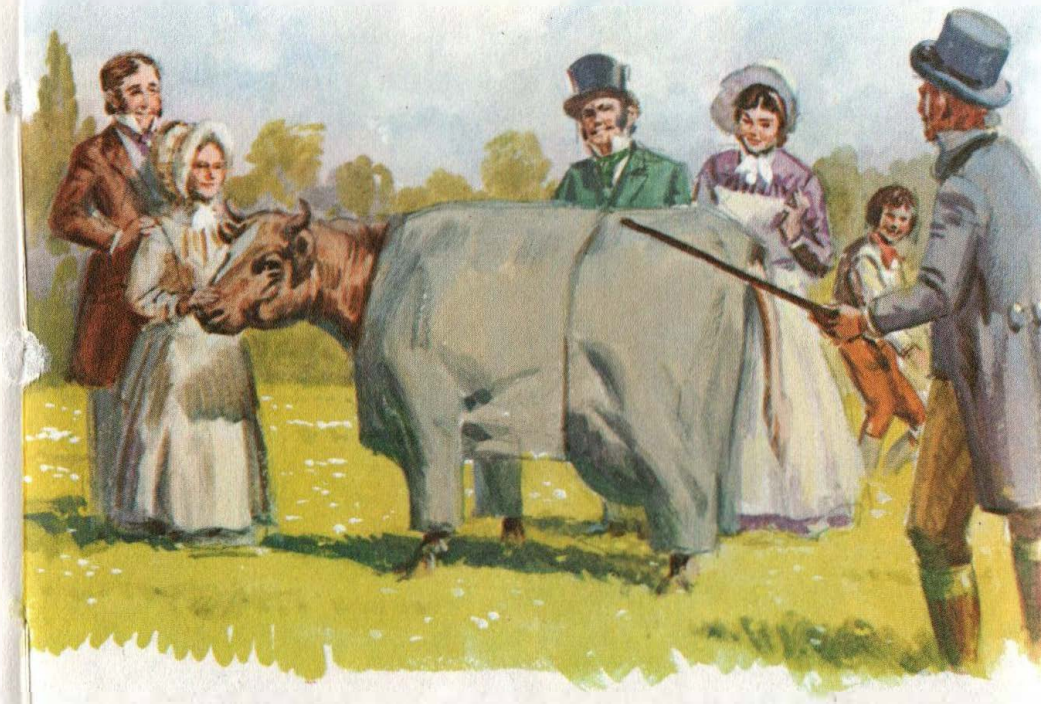
No. 43.] SATURDAY, JANUARY 18, 1851. [PRICE 2d.

THE PRIVATE HISTORY OF THE PALACE OF GLASS.

ON New Year's Day in the year 1837, a traveller was proceeding, in a native boat, on a difficult exploration up the river Berbice in Demerara, when, on arriving at a point where the river expanded and formed a current-less basin, his attention was attracted to the southern margin of the lake by an extraordinary object. He caused his crew to paddle quickly towards it. The nearer

a hillock of burned loam and peat; he deluded the great lubberly leaves by letting them float in a tank, to which he communicated, by means of a little wheel, the gentle ripple of their own tranquil river; and he coaxed the flower into bloom by manufacturing a Berbician climate in a tiny South America, under a glass case.

With that glass case our history properly commences. In imitation of a philosophic French Cook, who began a chapter on stewed-apples with an essay on the Creation, we have



In writing of Cranford, Elizabeth was remembering Knutsford and her childhood days.

The main characters of the stories were an elderly spinster, Miss Matty, who lived in Cranford, and Miss Mary Smith, a young friend who often came to stay with her. It is easy to see that Mary Smith is Mrs Gaskell herself, who used her memories of Knutsford folk and the gossip over tea tables and turned them into stories of Cranford, often amusing and sometimes sad. She made her readers laugh over the tale of the cow who fell into a lime pit and came out looking so bare that her mistress made her a grey flannel jacket and drawers. She also made them shed a few tears over the death of Miss Matty's old suitor, and the loss of her life savings when the Bank failed.

When Mrs Gaskell had completed the Cranford stories they were published all together as a book. Readers had enjoyed reading about Cranford week by week in *Household Words* and were eager to buy the book. It has remained the most popular of all Mrs Gaskell's books. Ever since it was first published, lovers of *Cranford* have been going to Knutsford to see for themselves the scenes of these stories of Miss Matty and her friends.

Elizabeth's name was now becoming well known as a writer, and she was encouraged by her success to continue with more stories and novels. She rose early or stayed up late to get her writing done, as these were the only quiet times in her full days.

Just before she started the Cranford stories, the Gaskells moved house once again. Their new home was in Plymouth Grove, Manchester, and was a large house with a big garden. Elizabeth had always looked forward to having a cow and chickens as Aunt Lumb had done. Now there was room for them as well as a flower and vegetable garden, and space for the girls to play. 'You should see Baby and Florence,' she wrote to a friend. 'Their delight is most pretty to see . . . every new flower that peeps up is a treasure.'

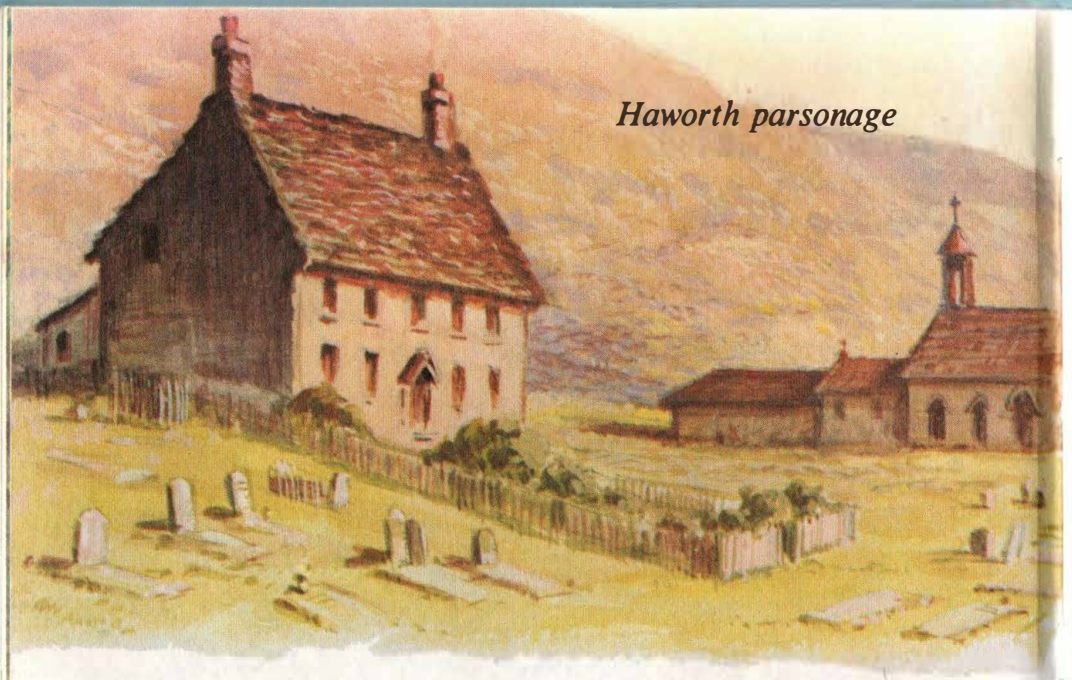
The Gaskells at first wondered if they would be able to afford to live at this house. A few years after they moved, William was appointed as senior minister at the chapel and Elizabeth's books were earning money for her; so they were able to meet their expenses but never lived extravagantly.

The Gaskells' home at Plymouth Grove became known as a place where all callers would be kindly received, and a constant stream of visitors passed through its doors. There was no change in Elizabeth's manner now that she was well known as a writer. She remained as modest as she had always been, and still found time to listen to others' problems. She was just as ready to give advice to discharged prisoners, orphans and widows as she was to discuss publishing dates with editors, or reviews of her books with critics; but first of all her children must be seen to, and plans for the day made to suit William's engagements.

Elizabeth crowded a great deal into every day, and this included giving her little daughters their first lessons.

William helped them with mathematics and Latin, and later they had a governess. They were all encouraged to play the piano, to sing and to draw. Elizabeth taught them to choose their clothes sensibly, and to look after them, mending and patching to make them last. They all had their clothes made for them at the dressmakers, and Elizabeth was particular about how they were made. 'I had rather you had a print gown made by a good dressmaker than a silk made by a clumsy one,' she once wrote to Marianne.

Eventually all four daughters went to boarding schools. Marianne, always called Polly and the most serious of the daughters, went to London. Margaret, known as Meta, who had a talent for drawing, was at school in Liverpool. Florence, nicknamed Flossie, and Julia, called Jewel, went away to school in Knutsford.



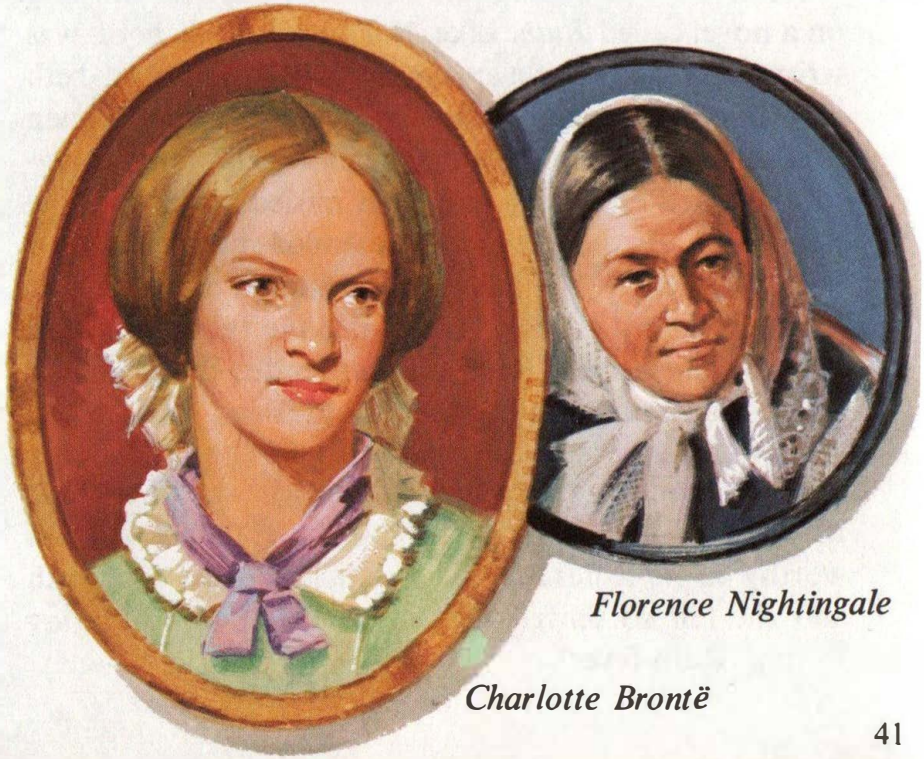
Haworth parsonage

'I prize this little wild flower . . . I think hers is a fine little nature.' This is what a friend wrote about Julia in a letter to Elizabeth after a visit. This friend was another famous novelist, Charlotte Brontë, who was writing books at the same time as Mrs Gaskell. She had been impressed by *Mary Barton* and Elizabeth thought highly of Charlotte's book *Jane Eyre*. The two women writers met for the first time at a friend's house in the Lake District. Although they were very different in character, they enjoyed each other's company and became friends.

Later Elizabeth visited Charlotte's home, a remote parsonage at Haworth on the Yorkshire moors, where she lived alone with her father. Then Charlotte came to stay at Plymouth Grove and saw something of the happy bustling life of the Gaskell household. It was then that she confessed she lost her heart to Julia.

Elizabeth also met another famous woman, whose name became known through her work as a nurse. This was Florence Nightingale, whom Elizabeth met at the Nightingales' home in Derbyshire. Miss Nightingale was at home taking a short holiday after a spell of nursing in London during an outbreak of fever. This was before she went off to nurse the soldiers in the Crimea. Mrs Nightingale told Elizabeth how Florence used to play with her dolls as a child, lining up all eighteen of them in rows, ill in bed.

In letters to friends Elizabeth described these two famous women. Charlotte was very little and plain and exceptionally shy but 'of a very noble nature'. Florence Nightingale had the merriest eyes and sweetest smile and was of 'a very unbendable character'.



Florence Nightingale

Charlotte Brontë

It was not only living people that Elizabeth described so vividly. In her stories and novels she brought imaginary characters to life. She used her own experiences and memories of people and places to give her stories reality.

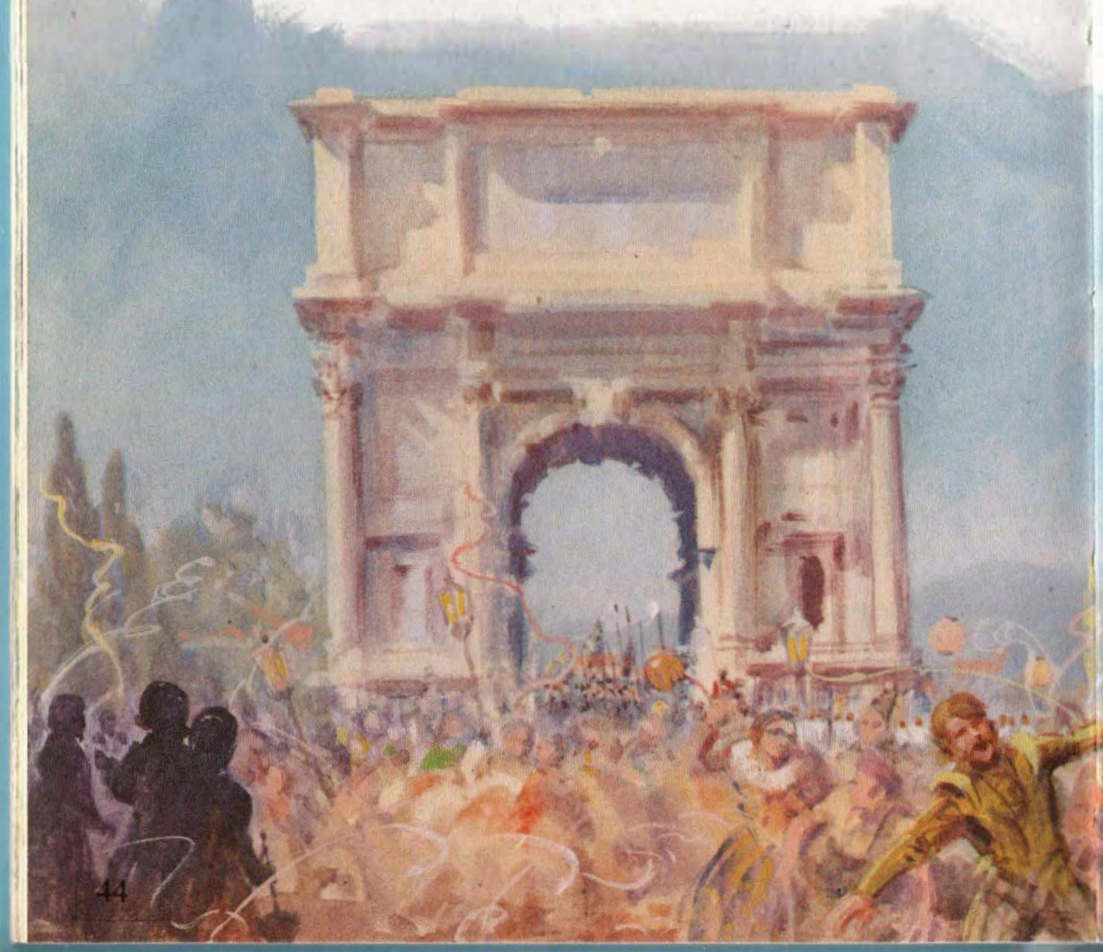
After *Cranford* she began another serial story for *Household Words* about a young woman who came from the south to live in the northern town of 'Milton'. At first she disliked the north and its people, but she grew to love a millowner who was kind and considerate to his workers. This story, called *North and South*, was full of Elizabeth's own feelings about Manchester. It too was published as a book after running as a serial for five months in weekly parts.

While she was writing this Elizabeth was also working on a novel called *Ruth*. Like *Mary Barton* this book was written to make people aware of the hardships Elizabeth saw among the poorer classes. When visiting women prisoners, she learnt how many poor girls were wrongfully blamed after they had been misled by men of the wealthier class to believe they intended marriage. Often a girl was left with a baby, penniless and deserted, and this was the plight in which Ruth, the heroine of this story, found herself. Ruth was befriended by a minister who closely resembles Elizabeth's old friend, Mr Turner.

Many readers criticised *Ruth* when it was published. Many prim lady readers did not think that Ruth was worthy to be a heroine. The criticism upset Elizabeth and she felt so unwell that she said she was suffering from a 'Ruth-fever'.

Another book that met with criticism was Mrs Gaskell's life of Charlotte Brontë, written after Charlotte's early death in 1855. Old Mr Brontë, knowing of the friendship between the two women writers, asked Elizabeth to write his daughter's life story.

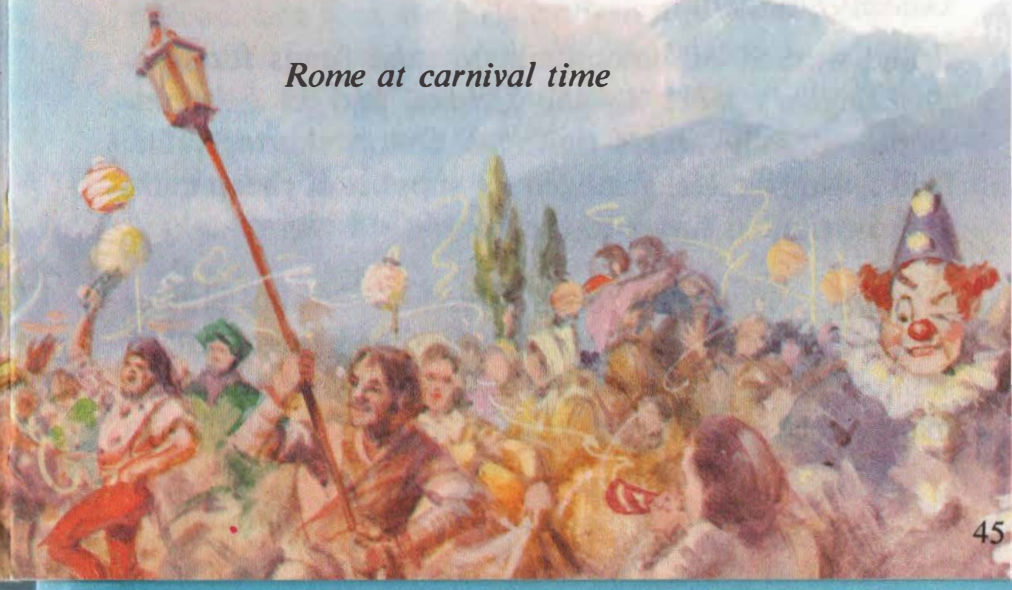
She went to Haworth to see him and met Mr Nicholls, Charlotte's husband, whom she had married only a year before her death. Elizabeth walked round the churchyard and surrounding moors, and talked to people about Charlotte's childhood with her brother and two sisters, also writers. They had all died within a year shortly before Elizabeth met Charlotte.



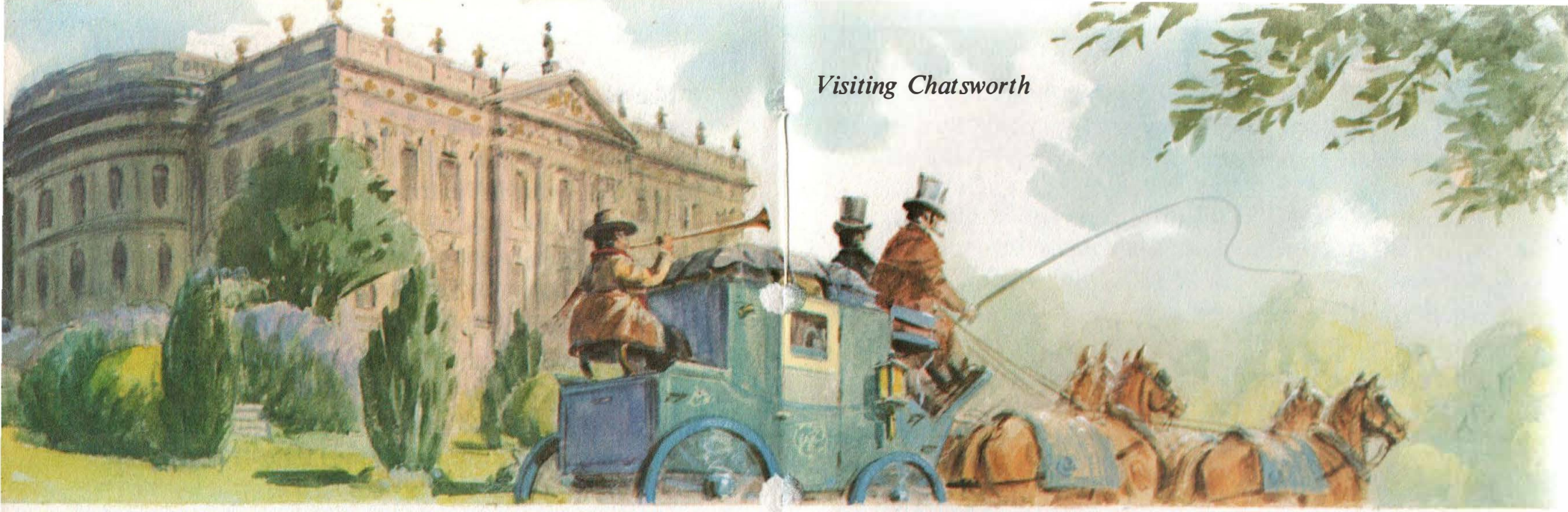
She visited the school where she knew Charlotte had been unhappy, and also went to Brussels where she had worked as a governess. Writing this biography was a difficult task and William helped her to sort out all the information she gathered. Together they read through all Charlotte's writings and letters. Elizabeth took several holidays away from home so that she could write all day without disturbance.

When the book was finished Elizabeth went to Italy to enjoy a real holiday, taking Marianne and Margaret with her. For the rest of her life Elizabeth remembered their stay in Rome during carnival time. 'I don't think I was ever so happy before,' she wrote.

She was not prepared for the criticism that was awaiting her at home. *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* had annoyed many people who disagreed with things that Elizabeth had written, concerning the school, and Charlotte's brother who had behaved badly. Elizabeth was very distressed, but she was comforted by the fact that old Mr Brontë and Mr Nicholls were satisfied.



Rome at carnival time



Visiting Chatsworth

Although many literary men and women praised the biography, Elizabeth had been so upset by the criticism that for a while she felt unable to write anything but short stories. These did not tie her so much to a strict timetable of writing, so she was more free for the countless activities that went on in and around the Gaskell household.

She worked on committees to raise funds for Miss Nightingale's work in the Crimea and to help unemployed millworkers during a cotton shortage. She held sewing classes, arranged for supplies of cheap milk, and distributed sheets to the poor.

She was now able to afford other servants besides Hearn and took great pains in training them. In the summer of 1857 she entertained, at Plymouth Grove, many guests who were visiting an arts exhibition in Manchester. 'We have two rooms and nineteen people coming to occupy them before the exhibition closes,' she wrote.

The girls were growing up and Elizabeth was eager for them to travel. She looked to her story-writing as a means of earning money to pay for holidays at home and abroad. She took the girls to Paris and Heidelberg, and they often joined her when she was invited, as a literary celebrity, to visit people in many parts of the British Isles. She stayed with the Duke of Devonshire at Chatsworth, but declined an invitation from the Prince of Wales to join his party in Scotland.

In 1859 Mrs Gaskell went on holiday with her daughters to Whitby, a fishing port in Yorkshire. While she was there an idea for a novel began to form in her mind.

Whitby Abbey and harbour

Mrs Gaskell was fascinated by Whitby with its old ruined abbey standing above the harbour and its surrounding moors. She learnt something about the history

of the town and its former whaling fleet. She heard of the days when its men were seized by the press-gang who took them off to sea to fight against Napoleon.

As soon as she returned home, Elizabeth started on a novel about a farmer's daughter who lived on the moors outside Whitby. She called the book *Sylvia's Lovers* for it tells the story of two men who loved Sylvia; a childhood friend and a man from the whaling fleet, press-ganged and thought dead who returned to claim her. It was a most dramatic story with wonderfully descriptive scenes of Whitby, renamed 'Monkshaven'. It took her two years to complete and when published was much praised.

At the same time as she was working on this, Elizabeth was writing another serial story for a monthly magazine. This was *Cousin Phillis*, a tale in complete contrast, in which Elizabeth was looking back to her childhood memories of the farm at Sandlebridge. This is a gentle story of a farmer's daughter and a railway engineer who met while he was helping to lay the railway track near the farm. When Elizabeth described Phillis' father singing psalms in the fields with his men, she was remembering her own Grandfather Holland.

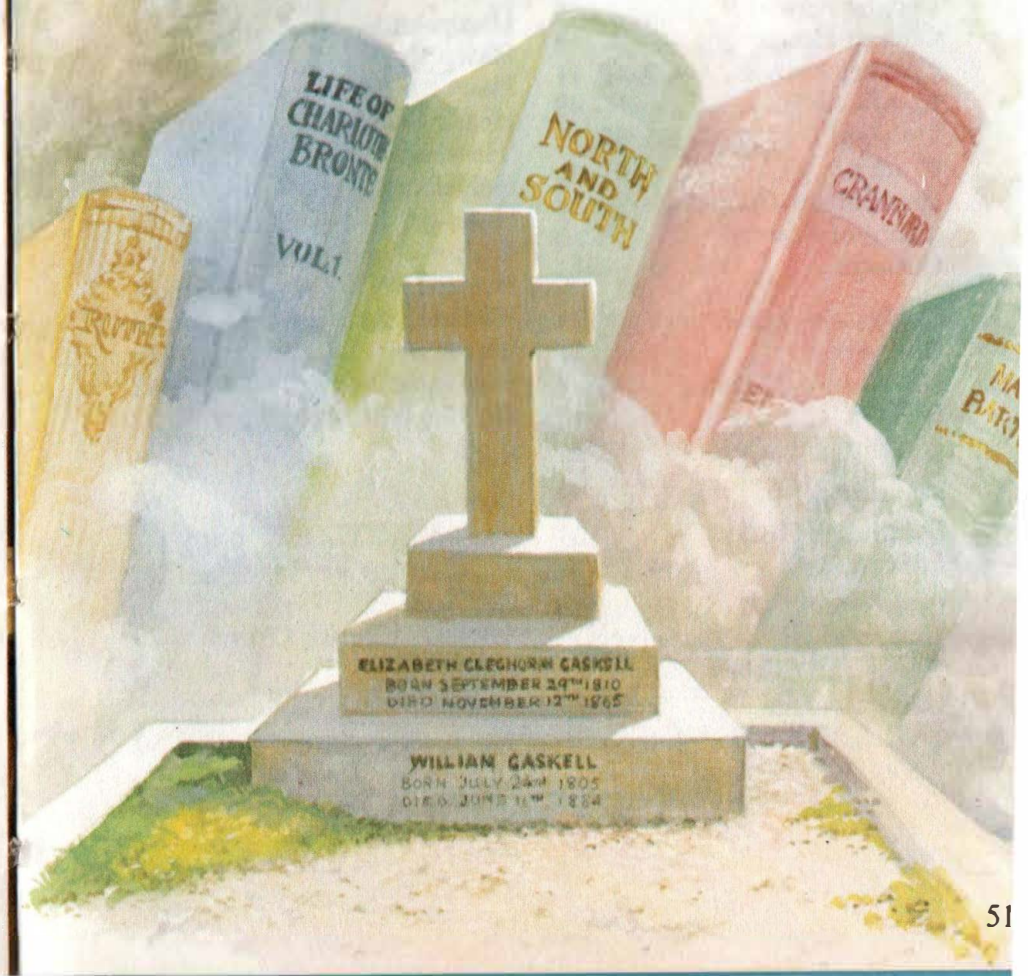
It was such a pleasure for Elizabeth when writing to let her thoughts dwell on the Cheshire countryside. She felt that she had no desire ever again to write on subjects that would cause comment and criticism. When planning her next work, she chose to set the scene once again in Knutsford.

This time Elizabeth called Knutsford 'Hollingford' and chose the title *Wives and Daughters*. She decided to write about the wives and daughters of three families in the neighbourhood. One was to be the doctor's family, in which she recalled her uncle Peter and his household. Another was the squire's family, living in a country house such as she used to visit for picnics as a girl. The third was the family at 'Cumnor Towers', which closely resembles Tatton Park. The heroine was Molly Gibson, the doctor's daughter whose girlhood experiences were very similar to Elizabeth's own.

Wives and Daughters was accepted as a serial story by a monthly magazine. Elizabeth was anxious to complete it and have it published as a book. She was planning to buy a country house in Hampshire with the money this would bring in. The house was to be a home for William in his retirement and was to be kept a secret until it was paid for; so Elizabeth pressed on with the book. In May, 1865, she wrote, 'I have four more numbers to write. I must set to and write hard at it. I shan't do anything for the next six months except housekeep and nursing and cheering up Hearn.'

Everything was nearly ready when she went down in November to join two of her daughters for a weekend at 'The Lawn', now furnished. While having tea in the house Mrs Gaskell suddenly collapsed and died of a heart attack. It was a great shock to everyone, for she was only fifty five and always so full of life. No one suspected that she had been over-tiring herself.

She was buried in the churchyard of Brook Street Chapel, Knutsford. William was buried beside her nineteen years later. A memorial tower was built in the centre of Knutsford in 1907, but Mrs Gaskell's books remain her best memorial. When we read her stories and her letters Mrs Gaskell seems to speak to us from their pages.



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